Food and Agriculture
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Women's participation in wood-based value chains in voluntary partnership agreement countries

MALEBI: Women at the forefront of sustainable charcoal production in Côte d'Ivoire

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The experience of the FAO-EU FLEGT Programme

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MALEBI: Women at the forefront of sustainable charcoal production in Côte d'Ivoire

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The experience of the FAO-EU FLEGT Programme

Mauro Bottaro

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
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ACRONYMS

CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEPICI – Centre for the Promotion of Investments in Côte d'Ivoire
CNF – Council of Women
EU – European Union
FLEGT – Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade
GTG – Gender and Forest Governance Working Group
HDI – Human Development Index
MALEBI – The Association of Women Producers and Traders of Secondary Forest Products
MEF – Ministry of Economy and Finance
MINEF – Ministry of Water and Forests
MSME – Micro, small and medium enterprise
NGO – Non-government organization
PIF – Forest Investment Plan 2016
PNSFR – National Rural Land Securing Programme
REM – Resource extraction monitoring
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
SNLVBG – National Strategy for the Fight against Gender-Based Violence
SODEFOR – Forest Development Corporation
SPREF – National Strategy for the Preservation, Rehabilitation and Extension of Forests
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
VPA – Voluntary Partnership Agreement

> *"We were perfectly aware that our country's forest sector was male-dominated, but we thought that we could have our place in it as well. We still believe in this."*
>
> Delphine Ahoussi, president of MALEBI

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1. KEY FINDINGS

- Women play an important role in Côte d'Ivoire's forest sector, in livelihood and income-generating activities. An excessive work burden and discriminatory social norms limit women's freedom, involvement in decision-making processes and access to resources and credit.

- Consequently, the forest sector continues to be a male-dominated field.

- The Association of Women Producers and Traders of Secondary Forest Products (MALEBI) has proved to be an innovative model of female entrepreneurship in Côte d'Ivoire, both for charcoal production and for community-based forest management.

- Technological innovations are key for MALEBI to improve and upscale its forest activities: the Charcoal Trace mobile application, developed by the non-profit organization Resource Extraction Monitoring (REM) for MALEBI with FAO funding, is showing promise.

- The Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) currently being negotiated between Côte d'Ivoire and the European Union (EU), a bilateral trade agreement which aims to streamline legal trade in licensed timber, represents a unique opportunity to enhance women's participation in forest governance. However, it is crucial to ensure that it includes a clear gender strategy and enough funding to guarantee long-term impact in the field.

- Policy and legal reforms and gender-specific capacity development represent opportunities for women in the forest sector. Innovative business models and branding strategies can be powerful tools to further strengthen women's position in productive sectors.

2. INTRODUCTION

More than 25 percent of the world's population, including one billion women, depend on forest resources for their livelihoods. For a long time, research on gender in forests was overly stereotypical, shaping simplistic narratives of men and women's roles and forcing multifaceted social realities into a binary gendered model (Colfer et al., 2018). Men were reported as the exclusive users of forests for logging, construction and the harvest of high-value forest products for sale, while women were traditionally identified as mostly responsible for collecting products for household use.

The reality is more nuanced. Evidence increasingly shows that social patterns of forest use by women and men are much more varied than previously thought, with strong regional differences (Sunderland et al., 2014). Despite a lack of sex-disaggregated data, it is increasingly evident that women play an important role in the forest sector, not only in livelihood activities at community level, but also in productive and income-generating initiatives. Nevertheless, women often encounter greater obstacles in accessing and benefitting from productive resources, assets, services, technologies, markets and social protection. Multiple household and productive roles as well as discriminatory social norms may limit their mobility and participation in public life. As a result, the role of women often remains invisible, and the forest sector continues to be a male-dominated field.

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This case study is part of the FAO-EU Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Programme work to identify the knowledge gaps and opportunities around gender equality in the forest sectors of Côte d'Ivoire, Viet Nam and Honduras. The three case studies use specific examples to assess women's participation in wood-based value chains and identifying possible interventions to mitigate gender disparities during VPA implementation.
This case study focuses on MALEBI in Côte d'Ivoire. In the framework of an agreement with the Ivorian Government, MALEBI produces and sells charcoal from wood harvested in the Ahua gazetted forest (in the South-Central region). In return, the Association is committed to reforesting 30 hectares per year in the same forest area. The reforestation activity is carried out with the support of members – mainly women and young men – from producer organizations in seven communities around the forest. MALEBI is a rare example of female entrepreneurship in the country's forest sector. Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) play a critical role in the forest products market worldwide, and it is estimated that they provide over 50 percent of total forest-related employment (IIED, 2016; PROFOR, 2019). However, there is still very little information on the role women play in MSMEs. As an example of an all-female small business based on the principles of empowerment and sustainability, forest conservation, capacity development and job creation for local women, MALEBI's case study is highly relevant.

This document will explore women's constraints and opportunities in the forest sector in Côte d'Ivoire, using an intersectional approach and assuming that gender inequalities are seldom the result of a single factor, but rather "the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences" (Hankivsky, 2014).

3. COUNTRY CONTEXT

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3.1 Socio-environmental conditions

Out of 32 million hectares in Côte d'Ivoire, 10 million are covered by forests (30 percent of the country's territory). Forests consist of the rural forest estate (70 percent) and the permanent forest estate. The permanent forest estate belongs to the state and includes:

- 236 gazetted forests (production forests publicly owned and managed);
- eight national parks; and
- five nature reserves.

Frequent economic recessions, high rates of population growth, logging activities associated with mining and household consumption (70 percent of which depends on biomass) and progressive felling of forests in favour of intensive farming are all factors that have led to forest degradation over the years. According to a REDD+ study, the expansion of agriculture (in particular cocoa, rubber, palm and food crops) is the key direct driver of deforestation in the country (REDD, 2017).

Charcoal accounts for 36 percent of deforestation in Côte d'Ivoire. Although a considerable part of the urban population (18 percent) already uses butane gas, rampant urbanization and recent problems in gas supply have led to a growing demand for coal, the use of which has increased considerably over the past two decades. This phenomenon further contributes to a significant process of deforestation in all regions of Côte d'Ivoire (Climate Chance, 2018), especially due to illegal exploitation that escapes the control of the authorities.

3.2 The status of women in the economic landscape of Côte d'Ivoire

According to the Human Development Report 2020 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Human Development Index (HDI) of Côte d'Ivoire for 2019 stands at 0.538, which places the country in the "low human development" category (UNDP, 2020). In all the indices disaggregated by sex that make up the HDI, women show lower values than men in terms of access to information and education, health services, control over economic resources, income levels and, ultimately, participation in public life and decision-making processes.

Since its independence in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire has put in place specific measures to close the gender gap and acceded to most international and regional conventions for the promotion of equality for all. It has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action and pledged to implement the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include the commitment to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG 5). On the internal legislative level, numerous laws and related reforms guarantee gender equality: from the National Constitution to the adoption of a National Strategy for the Fight against Gender-Based Violence (SNLVBG) and the establishment of the National Council for Women (CNF).

Despite these efforts, women are still underrepresented in the formal economic landscape of Côte d'Ivoire and suffer the indirect consequences of restrictive social norms that relegate their role to the domestic sphere. The labour market is generally characterized by the predominance of informal work, high unemployment, low productivity and low wages. These structural defects penalize women the most: for the same level of education, women have more difficulty finding paid employment than men, and women's earnings are on average 30 percent lower than men's (Institut National de la Statistique, 2016). Out of the 800 companies registered with the Centre for the Promotion of Investments in Côte d'Ivoire (CEPICI), only 15 percent are headed by women and the majority of them fall into the MSME category, with low value-added activities, marginal returns and limited growth potential.

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In the country's rural and forest sector, custom excludes women from land ownership (LandLinks, 2021). Under the customary system, land ownership in Côte d'Ivoire is typically defined along the lineage of a specific area's original inhabitants. In patrilineal communities, land is passed from father to son. For matrilineal groups, including the Baoulé and Agni groups in the Southeast and centre of the country, land is passed from maternal uncles to their nephews. Whether patrilineal or matrilineal, women have very limited access to property ownership and have less secure land tenure than men (World Bank, 2020). Formally, customary land rights were abrogated in 1935 when the state became the "owner of unregistered land". Since then, the government has enacted numerous laws and programmes to regulate the land sector, including the National Rural Land Securing Programme (PNSFR). Nonetheless, customary law continues to govern land rights in the majority of the country. As a result, most women do not have formal land titles and can only use land through their husbands. As a consequence, access to financial services, including bank loans, may be difficult for women not because of legal discrimination, but because they are de facto unable to meet the lending criteria established by banks, such as owning a title to land or a house, or demonstrating the production of a profitable cash crop.

Over the years, the government has launched several initiatives to increase women's access to credit and facilitate female entrepreneurship, including the National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2019–2024) to "increase access to financial products and services by the population, especially women and young people." However, the implementation of these instruments has been hindered by many factors, such as lack of training for women in income management;

lack of control over financed activities; insufficient communication and information; complex procedures to access support; and an excessive number of preconditions, such as the need to present business plans, lists of shareholders, etc.

In the forest sector, women's economic involvement is predominant in the non-timber forest product value chains, but they also play a key role in the wood-products industry (production and trade). According to the latest government estimate, women's employment in the forest sector is officially estimated at 24 percent and their participation is subdivided as follows: 52 percent in production of charcoal and firewood; 23 percent in other forest products; 17 percent in the timber industry; 17 percent at logging level; and 11 percent in the marketing of wood (MINEF, 2019). Even though the new Forest Code (2019) does not make specific reference to gender or women, the National Strategy for the Preservation, Rehabilitation and Extension of Forests (SPREF) promotes an inclusive approach and aims to ensure that everyone participates, including women's organizations, in "forest rehabilitation activities, the protection of reforestation sites, and the conversion of deforested and non-forested land into agroforestry sites."

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3.3 Voluntary Partnership Agreement process

In order to sustainably improve the management of its forest resources and retain its market share in the EU economic area, in June 2013, Côte d'Ivoire entered into negotiations to establish a VPA with the European Union under the FLEGT Action Plan. The VPA is a bilateral trade agreement whose main purpose is to guarantee that all timber exported from a country to the EU market has been produced and traded legally. Ultimately, this agreement aims to reduce illegal logging and strengthen forest governance in timber-exporting countries by improving transparency, accountability and stakeholder participation. VPAs are generally seen as a positive development for the forest sector, as MSMEs will need to comply with environmental, labour, and health and safety regulations (Cerutti et al., 2020).

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In principle, this translates into better working conditions for all, and both women and men could benefit from the likely introduction of core labour standards and social security provisions (Forest Trends, 2019). However, there are concerns that the VPA can only marginally address women's issues, and even lead to unintended negative consequences (Cerutti et al., 2020; TCI, 2017; Forest Trends, 2019). Despite the lack of sex-disaggregated data, there is in fact good reason to believe that most women in the sector work in the informal economy, without proper labour contracts, and are underrepresented in workers' associations. The VPA increases the pressure for legalization or formalization, and this could lead to unsustainable costs for companies in

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the sector, in particular for MSMEs managed by women, given their greater weakness in the market. This could involve their exclusion from formalization processes and therefore their exclusion from the potential positive impacts a VPA process can bring.

In Côte d'Ivoire, in the framework of the VPA process, a Gender and Forest Governance Working Group (GTG) was set up in 2017 by a resolution of the Technical Negotiating Committee of the Côte d'Ivoire–EU FLEGT VPA. This working group is led by the Permanent Technical FLEGT Secretariat of the Ministry of Water and Forests (MINEF) and is composed of representatives of the public and private sectors, and civil society.

The GTG has developed a gender and forest governance action plan for 2020–2021, with the aim of raising awareness of women's rights among stakeholders and promoting gender mainstreaming in the negotiation process of the FLEGT VPA and forest governance. The action plan is still in the early stages of implementation pending availability of financial resources.

4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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The objective of this brief is to explore the role women play in MSMEs in the context of wood-based value chains and how their role can be further supported, in particular in the context of the VPA implementation. To do this, the following guiding questions were formulated:

- *What distinguishes women-owned forest sector MSMEs (or with significant female participation) in this generally male-dominated sector? What has made this participation possible?*
- *What are women's roles in these MSMEs?*
- *What are the current challenges or opportunities they face?*
- *What are the expected impacts – positive or negative – of the VPA process on the status and economic/productive activities of women who work in the MSMEs?*
- *How can negative impacts be mitigated and positive impacts increased?*

In order to collect this information, various methodological tools were developed and used including:

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- A review of literature on the status of women in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in the forest sector; and legal frameworks, instruments and procedures supporting women's inclusion.
- A questionnaire that was distributed and completed by MALEBI members during a working session at FAO headquarters in Abidjan on 10 February 2020, which brought together eight members of the Association and members of the FAO-EU FLEGT Programme team.
- Focus group discussions with members of MALEBI, aimed at deepening the main issues addressed in the questionnaire and obtaining interactive feedback on the answers provided.
- Field visits and open discussions with members, women and men from the seven forest communities around the Ahua gazetted forest. The visits were carried out by FAO staff, together with the president and vice-president of MALEBI, Ms Delphine Ahoussi and Ms Kissi N'gbalamou Gnima.

5. FINDINGS

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5.1 Description of MALEBI

Founded in 2008, MALEBI is an association run by 14 women. MALEBI produces and sells charcoal while also conserving natural forests through advocacy, capacity building and reforestation activities. In 2011, the Association signed a partnership with the Forest Development Corporation (SODEFOR)[1] to participate in the management of 4 500 hectares of the Ahua gazetted forest, in the region of Dimbokro (See Figure 1 below). The partnership was extended through a new convention signed in 2018.

Thanks to this agreement with SODEFOR, MALEBI became responsible for some components of the Forest Investment Plan 2016 (PIF), an initiative of the Ivorian Government with the support of the World Bank. In particular, the Association is in charge of the reforestation of about 30 hectares per year, out of the 150 planned. The remaining 120 hectares are covered by SODEFOR.

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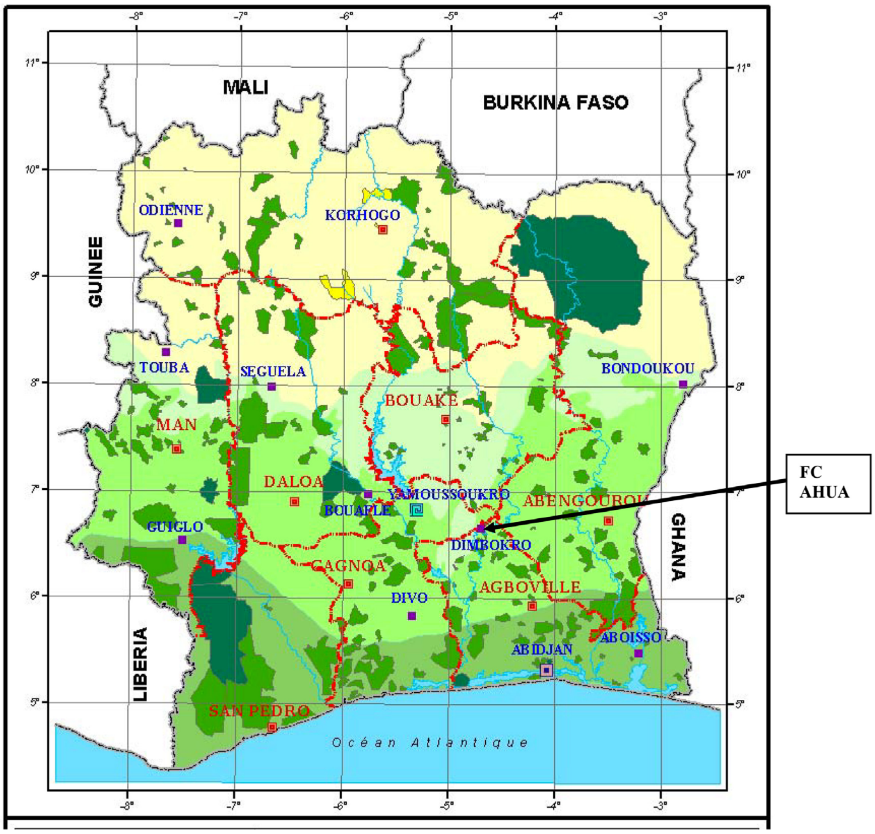
[1] The Forest Development Corporation (SODEFOR) is a state-owned company, created on 15 September 1966 and attached to the Ministry of Water and Forests (MINEF) and the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF). Its mission is to take care of the maintenance, expansion and enhancement of the forests placed under its responsibility. SODEFOR remains the sole manager of the 236 gazetted forests in Côte d'Ivoire, http://sitesodefortest.e-bordereaux.ci/index.php.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YAMOUSSOUKRO
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Figure 1: Ahua gazetted forest in Dimbokro, Côte d'Ivoire (ITTO, 2013)

5.2. Role of women in MALEBI

All the members of the Association, the 14 women cited above, including the president and vice-president, are personally and equally involved in the production and trade of charcoal and reforestation activities. Ms Gnima, MALEBI's vice-president, explained that "at the beginning, we [they] only produced charcoal in a traditional way, following unsustainable practices [...] by cutting wood in the natural forest. A few years later, we noticed that resources were dwindling." The depletion of the forest and the rudimentary production process threatened the sustainability of their activity (Delagneau and Ahoussi, 2019). This awareness inspired MALEBI to sign the partnership with SODEFOR to reforest a degraded portion of the Ahua Forest. In order to fulfil this commitment, the Association decided to involve the communities around Ahua and, to date, hundreds of women from the local villages and from the Women's Federation of Dimbokro participate in reforestation activities by planting native species, such as acacia (Cassia siamea) and teak (Tectona grandis), which have high calorific values and are suitable for charcoal production. In return, the local communities that participate in forest restoration can practise agroforestry and benefit from forest products.

These activities are based on a participatory approach, aimed at developing local capacities. The driving idea is to identify, alongside the communities, the challenges and issues specifically related to women's participation in the management of forest resources, with a view to offer relevant tools to promote gender equality and empower local populations. The Association conducts a range of activities with local communities, from strengthening the knowledge and practical skills of women, such as basic accounting and management, to the creation of nurseries, plant maintenance, agroforestry, forest management and rehabilitation. Mr N'Dri Joseph Koko, youth president in the village of Tromambo, explains how these activities have contributed to changing gender relations: "At the beginning, we refused to let our women work for MALEBI because we did not understand the importance of this initiative. But today we see many changes. Women bring important financial contributions to their families" (Delagneau and Ahoussi, 2019).

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Alongside these interventions, MALEBI promotes the sustainable development of the communities involved and increases social cohesion. To do so, the Association provides training on innovative charcoal production methods, which are both more profitable and more sustainable than traditional ones, and carries out awareness-raising campaigns against bushfires, a traditional practice used by the shepherds living or transiting in the region to control pests and stimulate fresh grass growth in the early part of the dry season (Rose Innes, 1972; Archibald and Bond, 2003; Dwomoh and Wimberly, 2017; Bassett et al., 2003). The practice of starting bushfires represents a major source of social conflicts between resident communities and pastoralists. Very often, such fires escape human control and end up damaging crops and communities, and even threatening the entire forest. Through awareness-raising initiatives, MALEBI has begun to change common knowledge and perceptions of the use of fire and fire regimes at local level, while stimulating an albeit timid dialogue between the local populations and the pastoralists, laying the foundations for greater social cohesion.

However, certainly due to its unprecedented nature, this all-female forest association in a male-dominated sector today faces significant challenges related, on the one hand, to the complexity of the forest sector in the country and, on the other hand, to a system of restrictive sociocultural norms, attitudes and practices that strongly penalize women's initiatives and entrepreneurship.

MALEBI
SEP-REDD+
STOP AUX FEUX

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5.3. Challenges and opportunities for the women of MALEBI

Many of the constraints MALEBI faces were highlighted by members during interviews and focus group discussions. To the question: "Did your family or husband support you in your decision to create or join MALEBI?", the first immediate response of all the interviewees in the questionnaire was "yes". Nevertheless, when analysing this answer during the open discussions that followed, it became increasingly clear that this "support" was actually a sort of permission, rather than an encouragement. Indeed, all women members of MALEBI stated that before they could undertake this activity and create or join MALEBI, they had to obtain the permission of their husbands, and often not easily. This can be partly explained by the fact that the work carried out by the Association entails that women members have to spend long periods away from home, in the Ahua Forest, especially during the phases of charcoal production and bagging. This translates into an overload of housework and childcare for their respective families, including husbands who have to meet family needs usually covered by women. In addition, during the focus group discussions, it was repeatedly highlighted that women spending long periods of time in the forest may often fall victims to malicious rumours. Proof of the common perception that the forest is not a place for women’s work are the numerous episodes of annoyance and harassment experienced by women during charcoal production and transport. This only reinforces the reluctance of their husbands and fuels disagreements between spouses. Finally, the idea that a woman can earn a living through entrepreneurial economic activities in a male-coded sector questions the traditional structures of a society founded on a rigid division of social labour. From the discussions, it emerged that men do not like to see financially independent women because, as explained by Ms Ahoussi, "it means to them a loss of power and domination." Social pressure is also strong, since, as a member stated, "it is dishonourable to see your wife get on a coal truck."

With regard to economic activities, the main difficulty reported by women during the interviews is the lack of access to financial resources and credit, which increases challenges for the Association. The only source of income for MALEBI is the sale of charcoal. This, together with the absence of a solid business model, makes the financial resources insufficient to cover all the costs of activities, ranging from charcoal production, bagging and transport, to forest management and reforestation. In principle, the agreement with SODEFOR is also intended to provide MALEBI with a wide array of services and tools to perform economic activities and honour the commitments made in terms of forest management and tree farming. However, to date, the terms of this agreement have only been partially respected and the transfer of expertise from SODEFOR to MALEBI has taken place very slowly.

According to its members, another major constraint the Association has to deal with is the intricacy of cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. The legal framework and policies for gazetted forest management are complex and evolving, as the implementing decrees of the new Forest Code are still under development. Gazetted forests are traditionally managed by industrial forest companies under state control (SODEFOR).

As for the opportunities, technological innovations are certainly a great chance for MALEBI to reinforce its role at the institutional level and strengthen its presence in the market.

The illegal exploitation of forests in Côte d’Ivoire, including for charcoal production, has reached alarming levels in recent years with dramatic consequences in terms of deforestation and forest degradation. Since 2011, MALEBI has been offering a solution that combines socially and ecologically responsible charcoal production with a commitment to forest conservation. However, such charcoal cannot compete with illegal production due to higher production costs and legal and bureaucratic bottlenecks. It is therefore essential for MALEBI to be equipped with appropriate tools and capacities to certify the legal and sustainable origin of its charcoal, and for MALEBI to use the legal and sustainable status of its charcoal to build a business model and strengthen market presence.

Between 2018 and 2020, the FAO-EU FLEGT Programme supported MALEBI by funding the project "Development of a pilot traceability system for legal and sustainable charcoal, based on blockchain technology." With the technical support of the non-profit British non-governmental organization (NGO) REM, a traceability mobile application entitled Charcoal Trace was developed using blockchain technology. The objective of the project was to track the charcoal produced by MALEBI along the entire value chain. To date, thanks to this application, 449 bags of charcoal have been traced from their production point in the Ahua gazetted forest to the sale point. This has enabled MALEBI to sell its products on the market, certifying their origin and the sustainability of their production method. Results proved that blockchain is a relevant technology for developing solutions for transparency and corruption issues, but it remains complex and expensive, which makes it difficult to maintain for local stakeholders.

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5.4. Potential impact of the VPA process

A factor in the country's forestry scene that can create important repercussions for the future of MALEBI is the VPA that the EU and Côte d'Ivoire are negotiating (see Section 3.3).

In Côte d'Ivoire, the negotiation of the VPA has only recently restarted after three years of technical assessments, so it is not yet possible to draw conclusions and learn lessons regarding its impact on MSMEs in the forest sector. Broadly speaking, the VPA represents a great opportunity for enterprises operating in the sector in terms of greater legality, transparency, governance and occupational health and safety. However, charcoal does not fall within the scope of the VPA at the moment. Hence, it is not clear what consequences the agreement might have on the economic activities of MALEBI. Should it be decided that charcoal must be included in the agreement, the opportunities for MALEBI could be significant, especially in terms of a more open and transparent dialogue with public institutions and stakeholders, which would result in a stronger position in the market. The Association would be able to better express its needs and to further explore possible solutions to the identified constraints. Furthermore, as a formal association that operates within legality for charcoal production, MALEBI could play a key role in contributing to the revision of the legal framework, which is relatively incomplete with regard to the protection of legal charcoal production, as the Association indirectly showed through the formulation of its own charcoal legality grid.

It is worth noting that MALEBI is at the forefront in ensuring that the VPA integrates a gender perspective through its active participation in the GTG. In particular, the Association, leveraging its work experience with women's groups in local communities, will carry out awareness-raising activities to improve knowledge and capacities on gender mainstreaming among stakeholders. In addition, MALEBI will participate in practical field studies to identify women's constraints and ways forward in the sector and, finally, it will take an active part in pilot initiatives on gender mainstreaming in the framework of the FLEGT VPA process in Côte d'Ivoire.

As noted above, legal production of charcoal generates additional costs because of the need to comply with financial and administrative regulations. MALEBI would therefore risk weakening its position on the market and facing unfair competition from illegally produced charcoal, which, being unregulated, is cheaper to manufacture.

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Female members of MALEBI demonstrated a great ability to think ahead and define new ways of working in a male-dominated sector. This has turned into a unique entrepreneurial scheme, based on collaboration with the government and on targeted collective action with forest communities. The relationships MALEBI has established with public institutions and with local associations are not founded on profit targets, but on the exchange of knowledge, technical skills and workforce. This makes MALEBI a real agent of change, in a socio-economic context where access to land and productive resources may be challenging, especially for women and young people. MALEBI has also succeeded in laying the foundations for social cohesion and sustainable participatory forest management.

Nevertheless, the Association suffers from stigmatization and stereotyping of gender roles, which associate female entrepreneurship with low skills and weak profitability.

The shadow of traditional norms and gender stereotypes according to which the forest is not a place for women is visible in the complex relationships between the members of MALEBI and their respective families, as well as with the social and institutional environment. The reluctance of husbands regarding women’s work in the forest has its origin in social patterns based on a rigid division of gender roles and work. This is partially reflected in the difficult dialogue between MALEBI and public institutions, as well as in its relations with local communities. The complexity of the relationship between MALEBI and the authorities reveals something trickier than a simple asymmetry of power between a public institution and a small association. MALEBI represents, in fact, an element of discontinuity in the economic forestry landscape of Côte d’Ivoire. Not only is it a female association in a male-dominated sector, but it is also an innovative partnership between the government and local actors for renewed forest management and a new economic model that focuses on gender equality, ownership, capacity building and empowerment of the most marginalized groups in forest communities.

As such, it calls for new ways of communicating at the institutional level, which are still to be defined. MALEBI partners with other women’s associations bordering the Ahua Forest because, as stated by a woman from the village of Tropambo, "men would never quit their activities to go and work with women." This, however, entails a double exclusion. On the one hand, it leaves behind all those women who are not members of the aforementioned associations, and who often are marginalized and very poor. On the other hand, it excludes most men of the communities, who have control over productive resources and decision-making processes. This model might thus lead to controversial relationships with communities and could jeopardize MALEBI's commitment to forest conservation and sustainable management.

In this context, MALEBI needs to develop business and marketing plans to build on its innovative structure and position. The weak regulatory framework means that it is challenging for the association to compete with illegal charcoal production.

MALEBI is a success story of resourcefulness, perseverance and foresight, whose comparative advantage lies in the ability to transform obstacles into a collective opportunity, challenging restrictive gender norms and practices, as well as the lack of legal and financial support.

Nevertheless, a number of aspects still deserve greater attention. Some recommendations are provided below, not only to strengthen MALEBI's position but also to increase empowerment of women across MSMEs in the forest sector, building on this example:

Actions for public institutions:

- **Policy support and planning:** Strengthen the legal framework of the forest sector in order for it to be more gender responsive. In particular, female entrepreneurship and women's participation in forest sector MSMEs should be facilitated. In this regard, it is crucial to ensure that the implementing decrees of the new Forest Code (Law No. 2019-675, 23 July) currently being developed mainstream gender and comply with the strategic orientation of the SPREF to guarantee the participation of women's organizations in "forest rehabilitation, the protection of reforestation sites and conversion of deforested and non-forested land into agroforestry sites."

- **Streamline bureaucratic procedures to remove obstacles in institutional communication:** Strengthen communication between public institutions and the civil society organizations of the sector, such as MALEBI, to foster greater transparency and collaboration, which can strengthen women's role in the forest sector. Leaner bureaucracy can also include the establishment of direct consultation mechanisms and multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms on a regular basis in order to explore solutions to some of the challenges identified in the sector. This would lead to making information on funds, markets and economic opportunities more accessible and enable women to be more involved.

Actions for public institutions, civil society and producer organizations:

- **Provision of services:** Develop and provide targeted services for women in Associations and community organizations. These services can be provided through numerous channels: government institutions and extension officers, NGOs and international organizations, academia, as well as apex and specialized forest and farm producer organizations. These services may include:

- Capacity development for women in the Association adapted to their needs, addressing management, business structuring, financial planning, project development, exposure to economic and social risks, efficient market and labour analysis.
- Financial services and mechanisms to facilitate access to bank credit, loan initiatives specifically targeting women in the forest sector, such as funds for women's entrepreneurship.
- Technical capacity development for the women members of the organizations working with the Association, adapted to women's needs. This should include forest and agroforest technical skills to complement and further develop MALEBI training initiatives, alignment of these skills with the needs of the market, revisiting the curricula and training tools to adapt them to the world of work and to technology and innovation. Such development strategies may also focus on organizational capacities and leadership skills to make women's organizations effective mechanisms for the empowerment of local populations, including men and marginalized women.

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- **Support associations of forest sector MSMEs** to develop business models to promote legal and sustainable production and explore new markets which are more discerning and rewarding:
  — In the case of MALEBI, explore alternative uses and new markets for charcoal, for example filters for water purification, medicine use, tooth pastes, cosmetics and beauty products.
  — This would also make it possible to target a different type of buyer, sensitive to these issues, possibly on international markets through fair-trade channels.
  — Develop a strong brand and marketing strategy to establish a footing in the market (Bolin, 2020). The support of experts to create a powerful branding model and connect MALEBI to large national and international trade networks is desirable.

Actions for stakeholders of the VPA implementation:

- Increase efforts to ensure that the VPA process does not translate into a de facto exclusion of women from the forest sector, most of whom work in the informal economy. The gender action plan developed by the GTG provides for specific initiatives to prevent this from happening, such as raising awareness on gender mainstreaming among stakeholders and conducting field studies to identify women's constraints in the forest sector and possible solutions. This gender action plan should be considered a pilot experience to further develop, implement and upscale inclusive and gender-responsive approaches and methodologies under the VPA process.

- Organize targeted communication campaigns to promote the benefits of legally produced charcoal to consumers: A major constraint MALEBI faces is unfair competition from illegally produced charcoal, which the Association cannot compete against due to its production costs. In order to outperform this competition, MALEBI needs to emphasize its unique role in producing legally and sustainably sourced charcoal. The Charcoal Trace mobile application was piloted in part to meet this need.

- Establish regular evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, and develop tools to measure the effectiveness and impact of the VPA on the socio-economic conditions of local populations and workers in the forest sector as well as reduction of illegal logging. Forest sector workers include those in the informal economy and at household level (e.g. monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, situation analysis, socio-economic surveys, gender analysis and stakeholder analysis).

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